

10. ATTEMPTED BREEDING OF THE BLACKNECKED CRANE *GRUS NIGRICOLLIS* PRZEVALSKI IN NORTH SIKKIM

A small population of less than 10 blacknecked cranes *Grus nigricollis* Przevalski has been regularly visiting Lhonak valley in north Sikkim as far back as the local *dokpas* or Tibetan graziers can remember. Their numbers dropped down to less than five and the frequency of arrival decreased drastically with the occupation of the area by the Indian Army in the 1980s.

This information was first received during a trip to Green Lake via Lhonak valley in July 1990. The teacher at the only school in the valley at Muguthang village (4500 m) Mr. Lama Tsewang spoke of the 'tung-tung' and identified the species in the PICTORIAL GUIDE.

In July-August 1991, a pair of cranes was reported to have nested in Thepley Tso, a boggy marsh near Muguthang estimated to be c. 2-4 sq. km. This area is used intensively for livestock grazing by the *dokpas*. There is also one army unit and one local police unit permanently posted in the area. After several days, due to biotic interference, the pair abandoned the nest.

I visited Muguthang in July 1992, following news of the arrival of the cranes and surveyed the whole area for four days where cranes were reported circling but not landing. They had left by the time I arrived. On December 6, 1992 a pair of cranes with one juvenile was reported from Muguthang, but as it takes three days to reach the area, I could not get there on time.

Upto August 1996, I have extensively explored the trans-Himalayan region in Sikkim but found evidence of breeding of the blacknecked crane only in Muguthang.

Three cranes arrived once again on May 29, 1996. The village *Pipon* or headman sent me a letter which took 16 days to reach Gangtok from north Sikkim. A wireless message was immediately sent to the army and police units to

keep track of the birds. A reply was received from the Sikkim Police that the birds had left after 10 days and did not return. Yet another chance to see the rare birds was lost.

Lhonak valley is perhaps one of the richest areas in Sikkim as far as trans-Himalayan avifauna, mammals and medicinal parts are concerned. The whole area is cut off from the outside world during winter when the Lungnak La, the only entrance to the valley gets snowed in. The entire area was explored from Lungnak La upto the north and souther Lhonak glaciers, the base of Chorten Nyima La, Khora area, Naku La and right down to the Zemu Glacier and Green Lake.

There is a good breeding population of the ruddy shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* and the common redshank *Tringa totanus*. Four avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* were also seen at Tso Chik at the base of the Chorten Nyima La. Himalayan marmot *Marmota bobak*, woolly hare *Lepus oiostolus* and *Ochotona tibetica* (?) are the most easily seen mammals. Jatamansi *Nardostachys grandiflora*, and juniper *Juniperus procata* are the most intensively collected medicinal plants. The entire area is a rich storehouse of wild genetic material as well as an important flyway for migratory waterfowl (Ali, 1962).

Lhonak Valley in north Sikkim has the potential of a good breeding ground for blacknecked cranes, one of the rarest cranes in the world, with the most restricted area and the prestige of being the only area in India other than Ladakh to support the species.

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USHA GANGULI-LACHUNGPA
Project Officer (Wildlife)
Sikkim Forest Department
Deorali, Gangtok-737101.